Okhotsk Sea via the Lena-Aldan-Maya rivers in the middle of the nineteenth century, a few articles on the native tribes, and cursory references to the Aldan basin in general descriptions of Siberia. It seemed an ideal place to explore. I asked Kniazev for permission to make a trip to the Dzhugzhur Mountains. He was pleased with my interest in Siberian geography and gave me a certificate authorizing me to travel for exploration purposes in all eastern Siberia—the area under his jurisdiction.

Then I offered the largest newspaper in Moscow, *Russkoe Slovo* (*The Russian Word*), a series of essays on the land I intended to visit. The newspaper sent me an advance payment for my travel expenses. An S-R exile settled in a village not far from Irkutsk, Mikhail Vedenyapin, volunteered to go with me. He was a few years older than I, not very tall but broad-shouldered, and had long black hair, a long beard, a deeply tanned face, and wonderful blue eyes. He was much better prepared than I for an adventurous expedition. Born on the Volga, he had worked as a lumberjack in his youth, had built and operated rafts on the river, and was, in addition, an expert hunter.

We went by cart from Irkutsk to Kachuga on the Lena, changing horses in each village; the peasants refused to go further than the first station from their home. We reached the Lena at the beginning of the navigation season. The river was swarming with rowboats taking prospectors and miners downstream to the gold fields. They were a noisy, cheerful crowd. Alongside beardless youths in bright Russian shirts one saw patriarchs in strange attire, with broad belts and vests studded with silver buttons. Old prospectors wore such buttons as decorations to prove their wealth and success in life; each button was worth half a ruble and would be accepted at that value in any pub on the Lena. I counted more than two hundred buttons on the vest of one gray-bearded giant. People came to the river—some in carts, others on foot—from the nearest railroad station, a hundred and fifty miles away. Kachuga was the terminal point of their land journey. Here each party would buy a flat-bottomed boat for the farther trip down the Lena to the mouth of the Vitim, the gateway to the mysterious land of gold fields—the Russian Wild West.

Life in Kachuga was concentrated on the waterfront, the high bank of the Lena. Most of the boats displayed there for sale had from three to five pairs of oars and could accommodate from twelve to twenty men with their goods and chattels. They sold like hotcakes, but we were looking for a smaller boat for the two of us. A peasant, with three score boats for sale, said to us:

"What you are asking for, brothers, is a fisherman's skiff. You need a *boat* to go to the gold fields."

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